

ՅՈՒՆԵՍԿՈ

230 YEARS OLD HYMNAL
THE OLDEST PUBLISHED ARMENIAN CHURCH HYMNAL
(Constantinople 1790)

The Ancient Book

Among my 22 rare books the oldest is a Hymnal (*Sharagnots*) of the Armenian Church printed in Constantinople at the end of the 18th century. It marks most probably the first printed Hymnal judging from the original format and style, with the duplication of ancient manuscript ornaments according to the feasts of the calendar year, in addition to some hidden details lacking in later publications. I also have an edition of 1850 printed in Constantinople, and a much later one printed in Jerusalem in 1936.

This 230 years old earliest Hymnal with its original wooden leathered covers I had purchased in Istanbul on my first visit to the Armenian Patriarchate in 1955, during the patriarchate of His Beatitude Patriarch Karekin Khachadourian. It is complete and intact with 832 pages with a cubic measurement of 17x13x6 cm. published during the “*Pontificate of Ghougas Catholicos and Supreme Patriarch of the Armenian Church in Etchmiadzin, and during the Patriarchate of Jerusalem His Beatitude Hovsep Vartabed, and the Patriarch of the Imperial City of Constantinople Zechariah the Theologian Archbishop.*” The date of the printing and the press are clearly stated on the opening page as 1790 AD (ՌՄԼԹ Armenian Calendar) November 11, at the press of Hovhannes and Boghos. The reading of the Armenian calendar as shown is 1239 AD, and an additional 551, when it began, will give us the year 1790 AD. The pontificate of Catholicos Ghougas Karnetsi of All Armenians lasted from 1780 to 1799.

The opening page of the Hymnal includes a list of the authors’ names, some traditionally ascribed and others correctly named, one of them being St. Nersess the Graceful Catholicos of Armenia whose numerous hymns abundantly shine in the book with his “signatures,” meaning with the initials of his name for each stanza of a given hymn. The equally verifiable authors named before him, are Catholicos Komitas, 7th century, and Catholicos John of Otzoon, 8th century. Specifically 20 hymns belong to St. Nersess the Graceful, in addition to a total of 21 remaining hymns with their authors’ names. The list of the authors appears unchanged also at the end of the Hymnal.

Decorations

It is amazing to learn that 230 years ago reproductions from manuscript miniatures have been printed, following the artistic decorations of the earlier printed Holy Bible in 1666 by Vosgan Vartabed of Yerevan. The first among those decorations in the Hymn Book presents “the Tree of Generations” with widespread branches, seated on its roots the oldest Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and at the top of the tree St. Mary carrying her Child Jesus. The writing under the tree reads: “*From among the Patriarchs are born the parents of the Savior of all, Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*”

The decoration above the very first hymn in the Book, dedicated to St. Mary and her parents, appear a pair of Angels with horns in their mouths proclaiming the birth of Mary mother of Savior Jesus, with a large ‘Է’ letter in the center, the seventh letter in the Armenian alphabet,

symbolizing perfection and accomplishment, itself meaning simply “it is”. The picture is for sure borrowed from ancient Armenian manuscripts with a decorated Altar. It is interesting also the picture reproduced on the page before the hymn of Great Lent. Here are seen Adam and Eve near the “Tree of Life” among various animals in a heavily crowded forest. Here the reading says: *“Eve deceived by the serpent, and Adam defeated by Eve, while they ate from the forbidden fruit and were expelled from Eden”*.

Ancient Musical Notes

It is curious looking into those ancient hymns with ancient musical notes on each and every word. Some longer words, by the way, are written “squeezed” to save space and paper, and instead a mark is placed above them called “badiv” alerting to read the word correctly. At the end of the Hymnbook all signs of music are listed with their identified names. The singer of the hymn should remember both the sign and its musical value every time he pronounced each word in the stanza, since each offered a sound on its own. Obviously, it is a very complicated system indeed that has not lost its application as yet. To sing the hymn one had to remember the signs and their musical value as prescribed on that last page titled “names of the signs of the hymn.” In fact, without those musical notes the hymns mean nothing more than poetry.

They are altogether 24 signs named with their corresponding musical values. As explained in that section those signs represent “circles” to abbreviate the music, given the length of the word, and “double oblongs” to drag the music as required; so also the rest 20 signs which instruct to add or to delete accents on respective words. It was only in the 19th century when musicians like Magar Ekmalian and Komitas Vartabed who studied them thoroughly who converted those signs into European musical notes.

1812 Individual Hymns in Total

Colophon at the End

It is the first time one can see the number of the hymns in total indicated at the end of this ancient Hymnal. It clearly says: “The total of the hymns are 1812 (in alphabetical numerals), adding those special 177 hymns to the original 1635 units”. It is hard to believe any clergy or student would count the hymns as this ancient version indicates, suggesting the spiritual message offered in each of the hymns individually, rather than collectively. For me this was something new to notice. It is important to note the rare colophon at the end of the Hymnal entitled “Colophon of the Printer,” which is not reproduced in later prints, for the simple reason being local and private. It covers two pages where historic and local data are recorded on behalf of those who worked and contributed toward the printing of the book. At first the intercession of St. Minas is requested *“who gave ability and success to us, the humble servants of God in order to enable us accomplish to praise Him for the benefit of the pure souls of New Zion.”* The colophon asks “to remember the late my father, the pilgrim Asdvadzadour and me, his son Hovhannes.” The names of sub-deacons Boghos and Haroutioun, sons of Hohannes are mentioned “who gathered the lead letters for printing, also Diradour’s son Zakar of Palou.”

Conclusion

This earliest Hymnal stands out unique as long as the subsequent editions have excluded some of the important data referring to the music and the canon of each hymn, rendering an old edition not necessarily obsolete, but useful as original. Subsequent editions, published in Constantinople or Jerusalem, lack the originality of the Armenian Church Hymnal.